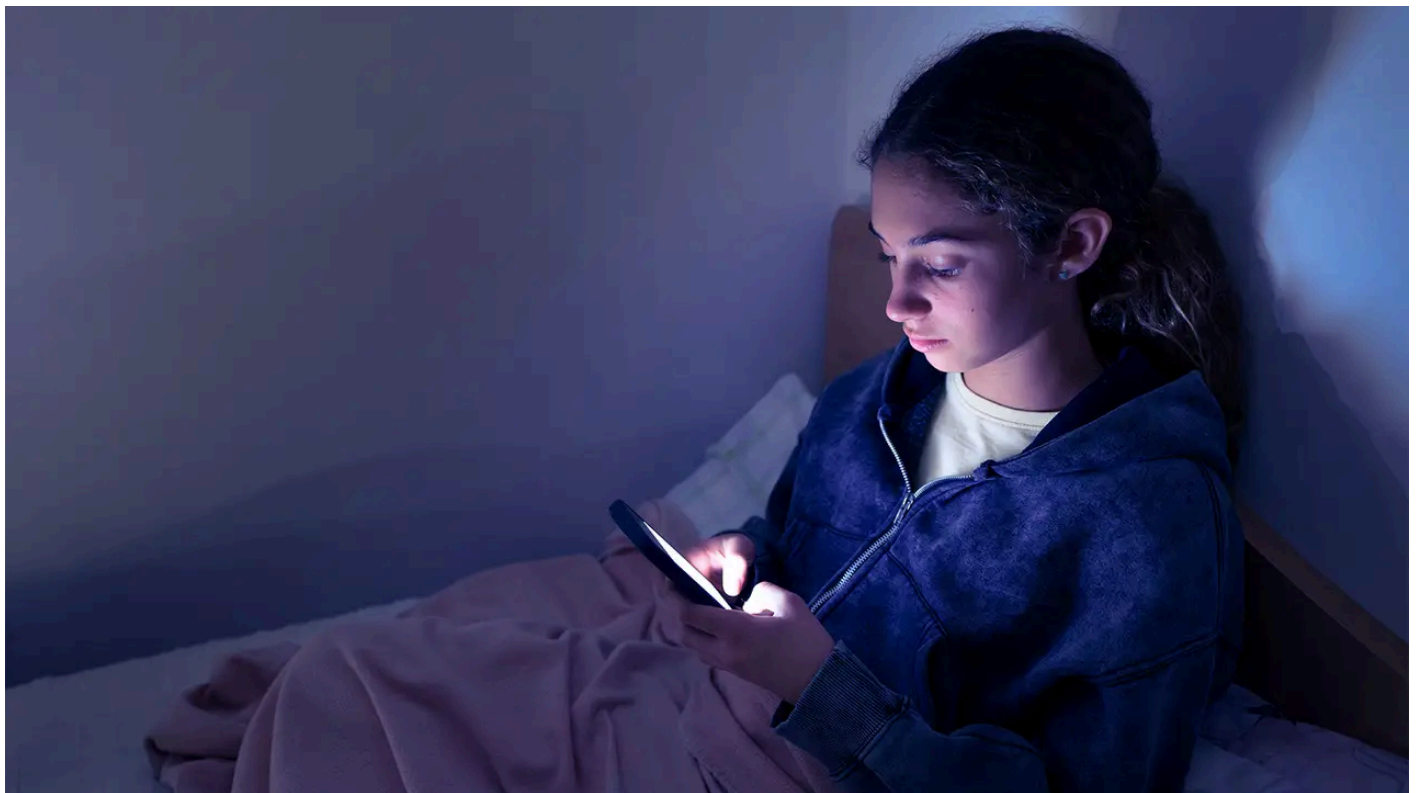


Is There a Link Between Screen Use at Night and Suicide Risk in Kids?

— Researchers are probing the relationship

by [Jennifer Henderson](#), Enterprise & Investigative Writer, MedPage Today

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Recent research has focused on the troubling relationship between nighttime screen use and suicide risk in youths.

A study presented at the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry meeting in October [garnered media attention](#) after the mother of a 10-year-old Virginia girl who died by suicide last year advocated for awareness of kids' nighttime cell phone use.

Before starting the study, Abhishek Reddy, MD, an associate professor at Virginia Tech Carilion School of Medicine and a child and adolescent psychiatrist at Carilion Clinic in Roanoke, Virginia, said he had observed an uptick in overdose attempts among kids.



"We wanted to look at data to see what was going on," Reddy told *MedPage Today*.

He and his team reviewed 6 months of data on overdose suicide attempts among 51 kids ages 12 to 17. They reported that 64.7% of overdoses occurred during nighttime hours, and 74.5% of kids engaged in screen use immediately prior to the overdose. Overall, 26 overdoses involved prescription medications.

"We were anticipating that kids overdosed more in the evening times, but what we found out was two-thirds of these kids overdosed between 8 p.m. to 6 a.m., and three-fourths of them were on the screens right before the overdose," Reddy said. "That's a strong coincidence. It's not causation, but it's a coincidence or a strong time relationship."

"We know that poor sleep can make depression, suicidality, anxiety, ADHD [attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder], all the mental health issues worse," he noted, pointing to the "combination of poor sleep and having screens and access to over-the-counter pills, because the majority of these kids overdosed on either their prescribed pills or over-the-counter pills, or family members' pills."

Indeed, the relationship between sleep and suicide risk has been studied in both adults and kids.

Joel Stoddard, MD, a child and adolescent psychiatrist at Children's Hospital Colorado and associate professor of psychiatry at the University of Colorado Anschutz School of Medicine in Aurora, who has conducted research in this area, told *MedPage Today* that there has been a "well-known, very large relationship between [nighttime and \[suicide\] attempt in youth](#) (as well as [across the lifespan](#))."

He noted that he and his colleagues recently "translated the known longitudinal association between sleep and suicidal thoughts and behaviors in adults" [to kids](#).

As for the research by Reddy and colleagues, Stoddard said that it "helps us initiate a discussion," but it does not prove new insights. Additional questions include:

- Do the results reflect the fact that adolescents are often on their screens at night when not sleeping?
- Was the screen distracting them from emotional distress?
- Were they using their devices to find help?
- Were they using their devices for preparatory behavior (i.e., writing goodbye notes or researching the attempt)?
- Were they communicating with others or getting bad news?



Ultimately, "what we need to understand is the relationship between sleep and suicidal thoughts and behavior, the timing of suicidal behavior, and the relationship between screen use and suicidal ideation," Stoddard said.

Reddy pointed to several key takeaways, including "having a good sleep routine for teenagers ... where they can get enough -- 8 to 9 hours -- sleep at night; avoiding screens at bedtime, at least an hour before going to bed, which are standard recommendations; and limiting access to over-the-counter pills or any prescription pills for teenagers."

It's important for parents to address these things, "especially in kids who are going through a mental health crisis, bullying, stressful events," he said. Furthermore, for kids as well as adults, it's important to remember that the brain tends to ruminate more on nighttime triggers, he added.

"There are many studies which talk about how poor sleep can cause problems with mental health, and there are many studies which show screen use at night can cause problems with sleep and subsequently mental health," Reddy said. "With our study, we definitely wanted to give parents strong tangible points or take-home messages."



[Jennifer Henderson](#) joined MedPage Today as an enterprise and investigative writer in Jan. 2021. She has covered the healthcare industry in NYC, life sciences and the business of law, among other areas.

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